

Black Film Director Snubs Hollywood's Rating System

Lane, Bill

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By **BILL LANE**

Melvin Van Peebles, credited with being the first black film director ("Three Day Pass" and "Watermelon Man"), became the first challenger this week to the motion picture rating system.

Van Peebles, however, chose to base his criticism of the rating system on racial reasons, rather than on moral ones. The system, set up originally within the film industry, is to list motion pictures under certain ratings based on their moral content, as to whether they would be best to be seen only by adults, or by the family, the general public or by anyone at one's own peril.

Van Peebles, aided by the American Civil Liberties Union, said he would submit his latest movie, "Sweet Sweetback's Baaadass Song," filmed in South Los Angeles, for rating by the Motion Picture Association of America. He said he expects his film to get from them an "X" rating. And if this occurs, he threatens, he will sue the MPAA.

Despite charges that his threat suggests intimidation, and Peebles told a press conference Monday that the rating board is composed exclusively of whites who have "no right to tell the black community what it may or may not see."

Some observers saw the Van Peebles
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move as an effort to gain publicity for the film rather than an effort to challenge the rating system's view of sex, religion and morality in motion pictures.

Van Peebles came in for strong criticism from many corners when he turned out the movie "Watermelon Man." The film first was titled "The Night the Sun Came Out on Happy Hollow Lane," about a white insurance man who through a genetic upheaval one night awakened to find he had turned black.

Star Godfrey Cambridge reportedly said Van Peebles made the movie, and its title, repugnant to black people and a laughingstock for whites who could only see blacks in a minstrel light.

The ACLU took the position of some white Hollywood producers that the MPAA rating practice borders on prior censorship. But no white producer, including MGM which criticized the "sex" rating given its film "Ryan's Daughter," sued or threatened to sue. MGM first asked that their picture receive no rating, as is Van Peebles.

Van Peebles noted for newsmen that the film code provides that an "X" rating be given a picture when its producer refuses to submit it for rating. Van Peebles said an "X" rating limits the number of persons who will be permitted to see a movie.

Van Peebles did not explain further his racial charges.